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ABSTRACT

Two research projects focused on use of casual markers (graders) for correcting and grading distance education (DE) students' work. A Charles Sturt University project convened focus groups of DE students, casual DE markers, and lecturers who "managed" markers to uncover concerns. University of South Australia research focused on pedagogical issues relating to DE marking, comparing approaches of permanent lecturing staff with sessional DE markers. It interviewed eight DE markers, permanent and sessional. Sessional markers were found not to be one-dimensional," but a diverse group of people who ranged from novice to highly expert; working in a field related or unrelated to the one in which they are marking; and studying at the university or with no other employment. Most sessional markers believed they were to some extent "short-changing" students; focused more on teaching and learning issues and less upon assessment; and were unsure of university policy on assessment. Permanent staff were concerned about the university's turnaround time and focused on being able to "defend marking decisions." These potential quality problems were identified: recruitment of markers outside proper employment procedures; markers with little knowledge of the content; and unsupervised markers with very little induction who often invented their own marking criteria. (Contains 34 references.) (YLB)

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Distance Education at Arm's Length: Outsourcing of Distance Education Marking

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▲ Bionotes

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▲ Abstract

The higher education sector, under financial pressures, is increasingly reliant upon casual staff for teaching and marking purposes. At first glance, marking of distance education (DE) students' work would appear to be an area where casual staff who may not take any other part in university life (and may themselves live at a distance from the university) could usefully be employed. However, for distance education students, their marker is essentially the gatekeeper to the university; markers perform teaching and, often, pastoral functions as well as an assessment function. Casual markers are therefore important custodians of university quality. Thus many universities experience a conflict between the push for financial efficiency and the push for quality improvement. Moreover, different universities have different cultural traditions relating to the extent to which casual markers are employed in DE courses, the degree to which such practices are seen as legitimate, and the markers' employment conditions, training and monitoring. Each institution therefore needs to resolve this conflict in accordance with its own history and organisational culture.

This paper reports on some empirical research into the use of casual markers in distance education courses. A project at Charles Sturt University convened focus groups of DE students, casual DE markers and lecturers who 'managed' casual DE markers, in an attempt to uncover the main issues of concern for each group of stakeholders. In addition a survey of DE students in a small number of subjects was carried out. The project uncovered staff development needs which are currently being addressed in a CUTSD project. Recent research at the University of South Australia focused on pedagogical issues relating to DE marking, comparing the approaches of permanent lecturing staff with sessional DE markers. Differences here may point to quality issues. Considering the dearth of published literature on the topic of casual DE markers, the results of these small projects provide a useful insight into areas of current concern to university lecturers and managers. They also allow the voice of casual staff and DE students to be heard in the debate, which is likely to intensify should universities further casualise their workforces.

▲ Introduction

The higher education sector, under financial pressures, is increasingly reliant upon casual staff for teaching and marking purposes. The use of casual or 'sessional' staff has been commonplace in many universities for many years, but the increased emphasis upon quality in teaching and learning over the last decade necessitates close examination of such practices. Where courses are delivered by distance education (DE) the role of the marker becomes pivotal, and so where casual staff are utilised for this purpose, they become the gatekeepers for university quality.

Considering that this is such an important area it is curious that little attention appears to have been paid to the role of the external marker. Perhaps it is the case that universities are unwilling to open a Pandora's box. Whatever the reason, this is a neglected area of study. This paper reports on two small research projects which have attempted to remedy this deficiency. It summarises the findings of the two projects, identifies problem areas, and indicates areas which need further research.

One project was carried out at Charles Sturt University (CSU), the leading DE provider in Australia, in 1997; and the other at the University of South Australia (UniSA) in 2000. UniSA is a relatively minor DE provider, but still with a significant DE enrolment. The former project involved focus groups of sessional DE markers, lecturers who 'managed' such markers and DE students; as well as a survey of students enrolled in three DE subjects. This study was confined to the education discipline and was essentially an exploratory study to identify the important issues involved in the use of sessional DE markers. Some of the issues are now being addressed in a current staff development project at Charles Sturt University funded by the former Committee for University Teaching and Staff Development (CUTSD). The UniSA project involved interviews with eight academics, both permanent and sessional, from the health and education disciplines, who were engaged in DE marking. This project focused upon teaching and learning issues and was designed to explore differences between marking approaches of permanent and sessional staff.

▲ How Existing Literature Informs this Topic

Whilst there is very little literature specifically on sessional DE markers there are two bodies of literature which have relevance to the two studies: literature on marking and literature on casual workers, in universities and elsewhere. These are discussed briefly below.

Literature on Marking

A most important observation on the literature on marking is that there is not very much. While assessment in universities is an issue of some importance, being addressed in several textbooks (e.g., Angelo & Cross 1993), the topic of 'marking', or 'grading' as it is known in the United States, generally attracts little attention. Assessment is generally treated as an holistic topic with the setting of assessment tasks, their integration with the objectives of subjects and courses, and assessment's role in the teaching and learning process being the major topics of discussion (e.g., Miller, Imrie & Cox 1998). Assessment is generally agreed to have two major purposes: to assign marks or grades to students' performance, and to facilitate student learning. It also provides an evaluation of the curriculum and the teachers' performance (Smith & Keating 1997, pp. 152-153). However the role of marking in this overall process of assessment is not generally separated out. Orrell is unusual in providing a useful model locating marking within the total teaching and assessment process (Orrell 1996, p. 65), suggesting that it performs three major functions: judging performance, reporting, and feedback (both to students and to academic staff). Orrell also maintains that these three functions are linked very closely to teaching and learning.

Several textbooks for academics, even Australian 'classics' such as Ramsden (1989), have no entries for 'marking' or 'grading'. (The major exception is Rowntree's [1987] practical yet thoughtful book on assessment, which has extensive index entries for 'grading'.) While an holistic approach to assessment, viewing marking as just part of a process, is important and indeed desirable, and of much relevance to permanent full-time academic staff, it bears little relation to the way in which many of the academic workers responsible for assessment, and the students whose work they assess, experience their roles. Information on marking is available in such textbooks, but is indexed under separate headings such as 'assessment' 'criteria' or 'feedback', serving the purpose of rendering the task of the marker invisible. Much of such literature is normative (e.g., Clift & Imrie 1981; Partington 1994; Brown, Rust & Gibbs 1994; Miller et al. 1998, pp. 109-111; Glenn 1998) suggesting procedures for ensuring reliability of marking, the setting of defined criteria, marking 'fairly' and so on.

Marking as a field of practice is rarely discussed in higher education research literature, with a few exceptions. De Vries (1999) analysed comments on assessors' marksheets when marking social science dissertations, findings that each assessor brought different values to bear when marking. These values emanated from their views of academic standards, the assessors' discipline areas and their experience in workplaces. Barnes (1997) examined markers' frames of reference (for example norm-referenced vs criterion-referenced frames) and their belief in a 'gate-keeping' role, i.e., whether they believe they are custodians of academic standards. Orrell (1996) examined academics' thinking as they marked assignments. She found that academics' theories about assessment (that it was a major part of teaching, for example) were rarely used in their actual assessment practices, which were largely focused on judging whether students included the 'right' content. As Orrell (1996, pp. 9, 113) points out, few academics receive formal training in assessment; and marking, in particular, is essentially private practice (Orrell 1996, p. 4) which is little discussed. Markers are therefore normally guided only by their university's assessment policies, insofar as these may be communicated to them via induction processes or their managers or the lecturers who co-ordinate the subjects in which they mark. Further than this they are guided by 'implicit traditions' and 'wisdom of practice' (Orrell 1996, p. 4). The implicit traditions may be dysfunctional; there is a tradition amongst some academics to regard marking as a chore. For example, the Oxford Brookes University staff development guide to assessing student work says

> Most lecturers would rather be doing research than assessing. Some would rather be cleaning out drains.
>
> (http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/ocsd/fw22.html)

Automated essay marking programs are currently being investigated which can 'free up valuable time that can be spent more directly with students' (e.g., Hurst 1996). Interest in such programs indicates the low regard in which marking is held.

Moving specifically to distance education, DE literature (such as Keegan 1996; Lentell 1999), even that relating specifically to marking (e.g., Cronin 1999), does not address the role of sessional markers. Many DE university subjects have enrolments of several hundred students with a full-time lecturer responsible

for management of teams of sessional markers who have had no involvement in either the writing of the subject or the setting of assessment tasks. Other subjects with smaller enrolments may be entrusted entirely to sessional markers who also perform student liaison and may even act as subject co-ordinators. Sessional DE markers of either type will search virtually in vain for literature which validates their work or helps them in their task, which consists of working with already-set assessment tasks. Moreover there is little consideration of how the work of markers can be integrated with the other parts of assessment: for example, how can marking be used as an evaluative tool when marking is carried out by sessional staff with no procedures for feeding back information to permanent staff?

In recent literature there is some recognition of quality problems associated with marking. Concerns about the reliability of marking are quite common; for example, Dracup (1997) found that where examination papers were marked by two people, there were often divergences between the grades given by each. Tata (1999) (using a justice perspective) examined students' responses to perceived unfair grade distributions. Grade inflation is currently a topic of concern in the United States (e.g., Edwards 2000). It is believed that grade inflation is partly a response to increased use by universities of student evaluations of lecturers; lecturers may give out high grades to (consciously or unconsciously) 'buy' favourable evaluations. Two recent American studies (Moore & Trahan 1998; McArthur 1999) have found that grade point averages (GPAs) given by sessional staff were consistently higher than those given by tenured staff. McArthur suggests that colleges may 'lose control over their desired outcomes' (1999, p. 71) if the problem of grade inflation amongst part-time staff is not addressed.

The above body of literature offers some insight into the practice of marking and the potential problems involved for staff, students and universities. It might be expected that the use of a range of loosely-attached sessional staff for this difficult task might increase such problems; however this point is rarely examined explicitly. The following section examines briefly the literature on sessional academic staff in the context of wider literature on casual workers.

Literature on Casual Workers

A trend towards casualisation and outsourcing has been for some time a feature of many industries, not just higher education (Vandenheuval & Wooden 1999). The fact that such a trend does not facilitate development of skills in the workforce is not often discussed (Hall et al. 1999). However, literature on casual workers finds that such workers are likely to have low commitment, be largely untrained for the functions required of them and feel marginalised from and poorly treated by the institutions they serve (Brown, Reich & Stern 1993). Brown Reich and Stern advocate that organisations utilise employment and training strategies based on permanency and commitment. Recent trends in the Australian scene may herald an acknowledgment of this argument; for example, Coles Supermarkets in 1999 announced that it would no longer employ casual staff, granting even its part-time student-workers permanent status.

The education sector is characterised by a large proportion of part-time workers (NCVER 1998). Precise data is difficult to obtain but there has been a great deal of research interest recently in this issue in the vocational education and training (VET) sector, although hampered by the poor data available. It is believed that almost half, on average, of TAFE teaching is delivered by casual or contract staff (Harris et al. 2000, p. 7). Equivalent figures are not available for the university sector but it is likely that similar practices obtain in universities. This is obviously a major research gap as well as a potential quality problem. Tertiary sector literature on sessional staff tends to focus upon the poor employment practices associated with part-time faculty (e.g., Kekke 1983); sessional staff have been described as 'gypsy scholars' and the 'academic underclass' (Banachowski 1996). There are also concerns about quality associated with the excessive use of sessional staff (e.g., Leatherman 1997) although there is also a view that sessional staff may bring assets, such as current workplace knowledge, to a university (McGuire 1993). The latter point recognises the diversity of the sessional workforce, which is rarely acknowledged in the literature.

Mainstream literature on staff development for academics largely ignores the role of sessional staff. For example a survey of teaching courses for new academics by Martin and Ramsden (1994), which includes a comprehensive literature review, discusses only full-time academic staff. It renders sessional staff invisible to the extent that it is not even acknowledged that only programs for full-time staff are discussed. There is some recent American literature on teacher-training for tutors, but it tends to assume that the sessional staff are (young) post-graduate students; this may be so in Australia in some universities in some disciplines but may be by no means typical. A recent New Zealand paper (Barrington 1999) makes a similar assumption, although providing a useful evaluation of one university's tutor-training program, and permanent staff's views abut the need for tutor-training, through a survey of 349 tutors. Barrington (1999)

and also Andresen (2000) make the point that teaching development of academic staff, whether permanent or sessional, suffers from the low esteem in which they believe teaching is held in the academy, and also (according to Andresen) from an association of teaching development in universities with 'managerialism'.

▲ The Charles Sturt University (CSU) Study

Focus groups of the three major stakeholder groups—DE sessional markers, full-time lecturers who utilised sessional markers, and DE students who had assignments marked by sessional staff—were held during second semester 1997. Each group had between four and eight participants. To avoid any ethical difficulties, focus groups did not include anyone involved in any way with subjects recently taught by the research team. The focus group of students necessarily included only students who lived in the local area. Marker and student focus groups were convened on 'neutral ground', in the local Education Centre. All three members of the research team attended each focus group. Main points were noted during the discussion on the whiteboard to enable participants to check the progress of the discussion. In addition, each focus group was taped with participants' permission.

A questionnaire for students was designed, derived from the literature and from the issues emerging from the three focus groups. The questionnaire was sent to 131 students in three distance education subjects, offered by the School of Education at CSU, for which external markers had been employed to assist with the marking. Permission of the lecturers and markers was sought and again, the research team was not involved in teaching any of the selected subjects. Questionnaires were anonymous, with the only identifying feature being that the students were asked to say in which of the three subjects they had been enrolled. There were 33 questions spread across a number of topic areas:

- Personal details (age, sex)
- Subject details (which subject, expected grade)
- Experience of distance education (previous study at CSU and other universities)
- Finding out that this subject had an external marker (when, how?)
- Feelings about having an external marker (attitude, beliefs about efficacy of external marker)
- Opinions about communication processes (with marker, with lecturer; and between marker and lecturer)
- Practices (with whom did they communicate?)
- Preferred nature of feedback on assignments
- Preferred method of splitting assignment load between lecturer and marker

Students were also given the opportunity to make general comments. A response rate of 42.75% was achieved by the closing date for the receipt of questionnaires, with several more arriving too late for analysis. This response rate was considered reasonable especially as the questionnaire was administered at the end of the academic year. The responses were entered into SPSS for analysis.

Lecturers' use of Sessional Markers in Distance Education

A range of strategies was used by lecturers in the deployment of external markers. In some subjects one external marker was used, in others three or four markers. Nine markers were involved in one subject with a large enrolment. Sometimes the lecturer's role was only to co-ordinate a set of markers. This was seen to have been a change from the past when markers would not have played a major role in any one subject. There were different ways of splitting the total load between students. Sometimes a marker would

'look after' a group of students through the whole subject (normally three assignments). In other cases one marker might mark all the first assignments, another marker might mark all the second assignments and yet another all the third assignment.

The lecturers reported using a variety of methods of recruitment with varying success. Generally they had to do this themselves; university management was not involved. Often markers had to be found at the last minute: 'It's called flying by the seat of your pants'. Lecturers made efforts to liaise with and 'train' their markers, but this was usually a limited process because markers were employed primarily to help lecturers with their workload and therefore lecturers were too busy to provide training or support. It was generally agreed that it was difficult to insist on markers providing extensive feedback to students because of the low pay given to markers. One focus group member pointed out, 'Some people make a choice to mark meticulously, others just write one comment on (an essay) because they figure that's all they're paid for'. Lecturers generally found that their assignments were not returned to the students within the 21-day period preferred by the university. Some lecturers were happy to allow markers to return assignments directly to students and justified this position with comments such as, 'If I'm employing someone to mark why would I do the work again?', while others liked to check assignments before they were returned to students.

Interaction between the lecturer and the marker was easy if the marker was in some other way connected with the university. For instance, in one case the marker was a post-graduate student so interaction took place 'in the corridor'. Otherwise, markers would speak to lecturers by phone, but it was not clear who generally initiated such contact. There did not seem to be a general practice of giving regular feedback to markers on their performance, although new markers were often supported quite carefully. Lecturers would often discuss particular cases with markers (e.g., where a student was failing). Lecturers would often pass on particularly positive or negative comments too. However the best indicator of a marker's performance seemed to be whether markers were re-employed, though lecturers never seemed to tell markers if they were not going to re-employ them.

In general these lecturers found many problems with the practice of using external markers. They were concerned that students are often not aware of the fact that there is an external marker. They were concerned that markers were underpaid, under-supported and under-trained, yet were also conscious of the fact that if they tried to remedy the lack of training and support themselves they would be taking on work which the employment of external markers was supposed to lift from their shoulders.

They believed that it was difficult to make markers aware of expectations in terms of amount of feedback and nature of feedback, with an unwillingness to place too many demands on markers because of the low pay. A particular problem was felt to be with the distribution of grades. In the School of Education, the site of the study, markers were generally school or TAFE teachers, and one lecturer felt that schoolteachers could think '16 out of 30 is a bad mark'. The markers tended not to work within the university's guidelines for grade distribution. This was perceived as a problem because if the scaling was 'wrong' then the lecturer had to go back and scale all the marks. One lecturer said that if the marker didn't do the scaling 'there's no point them marking it'. The implication of this comment was that this lecturer saw marking as an assessment exercise and not a teaching exercise. Lecturers had several suggestions for improving the use of external markers but were aware that many of them (such as paying markers to familiarise themselves with student DE materials) would be impossible for resource reasons.

Sessional DE Markers' Practices and Views about Marking

The first issue that emerged from the focus group was that markers were not one-dimensional characters. Markers could fulfil several roles in the university system and these affected their practices as markers. One marker was employed as a marker in two different faculties and found that his major difficulty was with the difference between the expectations of markers in the different faculties. Other markers were also, or had been, DE or face-to-face students themselves, and this coloured their practices and opinions.

Markers were generally unclear about the criteria on which their performance would be judged. For instance, was the speed of turnaround of assignments a major aspect on which their performance would be assessed? Or was it more important to give full and detailed comments on assignments? They knew they had to keep proper records but felt they were not paid for this. They knew that students needed a general feedback sheet but again felt it was not their job to produce one. They wanted documentation of practices and of the responsibilities of each stakeholder in the process. The time allowance was not enough for them to be available for student consultation—although they felt that contact with students would be beneficial. One marker said that it took him nearly half an hour—the time allowance—just to read each essay, let alone mark them.

Generally the markers agreed that there were insufficient guidelines for them in their work. They tended to have to take the initiative in seeking guidance and there were a number of issues about which they had concerns; they listed the following:

- Are you allowed to fail students?
- What constitutes a High Distinction, Distinction, Credit and so on?
- How are grades supposed to be distributed?
- What are the employing Faculty's policies on referencing style?
- How do you interpret the questions?
- What do you do when students exceed the word limit?
- How do you know whether the student is plagiarising?
- How much feedback should you give students?

The markers considered all of these matters as being of the utmost importance in improving students' learning and in the assurance of quality. Their concern about these issues indicated that they had received inadequate training, and also that they felt uneasy about asking for assistance (or alternatively that they had not, prior to the focus group, examined their practices closely enough to discover the gaps in their expertise).

DE Students' Views about Sessional Markers

The views of the students in the focus group relating to the use of sessional markers provided a useful comparison with those from the lecturer and marker groups. The students' views centred on the ways in which practices impacted upon them. There was full agreement within the focus group of a negative opinion about the practice of using sessional markers. This was despite the fact that at least one member of the focus group was an external marker for a subject in another School of the university.

Their concerns predominantly revolved around issues of consistency of expectations between the marker and the lecturer or between and amongst a number of external markers involved in the same subject. The students indicated they would like to be made aware that their work is being marked by someone other than their designated lecturer, and how consistency is being ensured. Their perception was that the lecturer was usually the person who has written the DE materials and that the lecturer had a particular frame of mind when setting assignment questions. According to the students, translation of this frame of mind to several other markers who, themselves, have only read the published material, must present difficulties in terms of interpretation both of the material and of the assignment questions and their responses.

In the survey responses, just over 30 per cent of students said that they had not known their work had been marked by a sessional marker until they received the survey, compared with just under half who knew at least by the return of the first assignment. The survey students overwhelmingly supported the notion that students should be made aware that their work was being marked externally (91% yes: 5% no). Upon discovering that they had a sessional marker grading their work, none of the students indicated that they were pleased about the situation; 39% said they were displeased, and 57% 'didn't care either way'.

On the broad issue of marker expertise, 25% felt that the marker's knowledge base was less extensive than the lecturer's; however, only 5% believed that the marker's knowledge base may have been insufficient for someone marking in the subject. Twelve per cent of students lacked confidence that the university employs sufficiently well-qualified persons to act as external markers.

The focus group students felt that markers' comments could upset some students, especially those who have not studied for quite some time. That is, the students felt that the markers may have unrealistic

expectations of what the student should be able to do. Such an issue is compounded in studying at a distance in which the marker's feedback on assignments may well be the only contact the students have with the university in terms of the subject and their own performance. They felt this could be ameliorated if there was good liaison between the marker and the lecturer. About half the students thought that there was regular or frequent contact between the lecturer and the markers, and half believed that contact was at best occasional or that there was no personal contact at all.

Feedback on assignments was regarded as important by both groups of students. The focus group indicated that markers should be reminded that this is sometimes the only contact students have with the university (34% of survey students said they did not communicate with the university except through assignments) so quality feedback is important. Most of those who responded to the survey seemed largely content that feedback was adequate (66% felt the marker gave the same amount or more feedback than the lecturer, with a further 20% who felt unable to make a comparison).

One student's comments reflected many students' concerns but also the common understanding of the difficulties with which lecturers and sessional markers alike had to contend.

> Overall I have been very happy studying externally and appreciate the time constraints lecturers must be under. Pages left unmarked are disheartening as I am also busy -working full time and studying and always do my best to complete assignments comprehensively. Some lecturers assume that minimum effort has been used to complete work, and I acknowledge that some students do. The 'tone' in a comment can sometimes leave me disgruntled but this has only happened occasionally and the positive experiences and useful assignments far outweigh any criticism.

Project Outcome

The primary outcome from this project was a recommendation for comprehensive staff development for markers and lecturers to address specific issues relating to recruitment practices, expectations of one group for the other, liaison and consistency, and developing relationships with students. Likely concomitant effects from this staff development were seen to be higher student satisfaction with the marking process, higher university confidence in the work of markers, increased retention rates of students and lower turnover of sessional markers. As mentioned above, CUTSD funding was received for such a staff development and a project was carried out to construct staff development 'folios' for the different stakeholder groups. The folios and associated workshops are being trialled in second semester 2000.

▲ The University of South Australia (UniSA) Study

In order to understand the different approaches of academics to the task of marking external students' assignments, eight staff at the University of South Australia were interviewed, mainly face to face but with one telephone and one electronic interview. Some of the staff were permanent members of the university faculty, and others were sessional staff with varying degrees of connection to the university. Interviews took around 30 minutes each and were carried out during first semester 2000. They were focused on the following areas:

- the markers' conceptions of marking: what its purpose is and what it involves;
- the markers' self-efficacy in the marking task and their major anxieties when undertaking the task;
- the means by which they were supervised and by which they developed themselves as markers;
- the way in which their role as markers facilitates students' learning; and
- their own views about the differences between sessional and full-time staff as DE markers.

Table 1 gives details about each person, including their discipline areas, the amount of experience they had of marking, and how much they enjoyed the task of marking.

Name (Pseudo-nyms)	Permanent or casual	Discipline area of marking	'Novice' or 'expert'[1]	Enjoyment of marking (out of 10)[2]	Other employment (if applicable)
Abby	Casual	Nursing	Expert	5	-
Alice	Casual	Adult education	Novice	8	Dancer; internal PhD student at UniSA
David	Casual	Adult education	Mid	9	Architect; internal PhD student at UniSA
Margaret	Casual	Nursing	Expert	n/k	Consultant
Heather	Permanent (0.6)	Radiography	Novice	7	Radiographer
Izzy	Permanent	Nursing	Expert	8	-
Jane	Permanent	Nursing	Mid	0[3]	-
Maddy	Permanent	Adult education	Expert	8	-

[1] Since there is no satisfactory definition of 'expert', for the purposes of this table 'expert' was defined as someone with four years' or more full-time equivalent experience of marking; novice as someone with less than one year's full-time equivalent experience, and 'mid' for those in between.

[2] This was a self-assessment; markers were asked to say how much they enjoyed marking, on a scale of 0 to 10.

[3] Jane pointed out that her enjoyment of marking was at an all-time low because of pressure of work; the research was carried out just after final assignments for the semester were submitted.

Table 1: Details of distance education markers interviewed for the UniSA study

Conceptions of Marking

The markers' conceptions of marking were examined by means of two questions

- If a new marker started tomorrow what would you tell him or her about the job of marking in general and marking DE students' assignments in particular?

- If you were selecting a new external marker what qualities would you look for in applicants?

Several of the permanent staff thought they would tell new markers about administrative issues such as grading criteria, university policies on plagiarism and so on; they generally said they would talk to the marker about the amount of feedback needed. They were also interested in explaining the opportunity that marking offered for interaction with students:

> Marking is the most individual attention you give to students. (Izzy)

Interestingly it was the sessional markers who focused on learning issues, offering comments such as

> You need to feed back to students about their knowledge and the ability to apply it. (Abby)
>
> The main role is to help the students learn. (Margaret)
>
> My interest is in learning not outcomes. (David)
>
> Marking is about understanding what students need and being able to offer it to them. It's more specific than consulting with them or talking in a tutorial. (Alice)

When discussing the particular role of marking vis a vis DE students, most agreed that markers needed to take particular care with DE students. It was generally felt that DE students had limited interaction with the university and that extensive and supportive feedback. Once more it was the sessional staff who tended to focus on the support needed for students. The permanent staff were more likely to focus on the relative equity positions of internal and DE students. Generally DE students were seen as being disadvantaged, although one full-timer noted that because UniSA had a turnaround time stipulated for external students, DE assignments tended to get marked more quickly than internal assignments.

When selecting a hypothetical new marker, few considered expert content knowledge as being of paramount importance. Although a few noted that they considered a certain amount of content knowledge as being 'given', they were all more likely to offer comments falling into two major categories and one minor category. The two major categories, together with comments which can be classified within them, were:

Able to relate to students in consultations and in writing feedback:

> Genuine; approachable; enthusiastic; tolerant; a good listener; jovial; flexible.

Understanding educational issues and being 'scholarly':

> An understanding of adult education principles; interested in student learning; possessing academic rigour; able to access a wide range of information; interested in the subject.

The minor category related to being trustworthy in performing their duties from the university's point of view:

> Organised; a team player; can be trusted to write enough feedback.

There did not seem to be any significant difference between the permanent and sessional staff in this area.

Self-efficacy

The permanent staff appeared to have more confidence than the sessional staff. The confidence appeared mainly to reside in the fact that they felt able to defend their assessment decision should student s complain. Their areas of anxiety were mainly related to distinguishing between grades and to how the students might react to feedback. Heather was the least confident of the permanent staff, which was to be expected as she was in her first semester of employment. Her main area of concern related to whether the students detected that she was not altogether confident in the subject matter.

Sessional staff were, on the whole, less confident. This was not necessarily related to experience. Although Alice, for example, felt that students might think she was 'too young' to judge them (she was in her 20s and taught in a course where the students were mainly middle-aged), Margaret also felt unconfident, despite many years as a senior full-time academic before becoming a sessional marker. Margaret said,

> Of course I have doubts ... If the first 10 assignment have no grasp of concepts I'd think maybe my expectations are too high, maybe I'm having a bad hair day.

The sessional staff members did not seem so concerned about students possibly querying results, with the exception of Abby was the most closely linked to the university of the sessionals, working many hours at the university in her own office. Alice worried about whether she was doing the 'right thing' by the university. Alice said,

> I wasn't given any marking criteria so I made some up myself. I wondered was it presumptuous? Was it what the institution approved of?

David was among the more confident of the sessional staff; this confidence appeared to relate to the fact that in his marking he considered he was implementing sound adult learning principles (he was writing a thesis in the adult learning area) and was not overly-concerned with the university's requirements. David said,

> Basically I thought if they had completed the work and handed it in then they deserved a credit. Then when it came to the second assignment I gave them a Distinction if they had improved on the first one.

Supervision and Staff Development

None of the staff members was formally supervised; most acknowledged that this was wrong and that they ought to be. The permanent staff members were more likely to be involved in teams for moderation processes but the sessionals, paradoxically, were more likely to be left on their own. Maddy noted that the university monitored her assignment 'turnaround times', but interpreted this as surveillance rather than supervision. All had found someone with whom to talk over marking problems: other staff at the university, either within the department, or in Alice's case a friend who marked in a different department. This process was obviously easier for the sessional staff where the staff had close links to the university; Abby was virtually a permanent staff member and Alice was a PhD student.

The fact that none of the staff was supervised illustrates a somewhat worrying of quality control on the part of university management. Being left to one's own professional devices might perhaps be justified if the staff made strenuous efforts to improve their expertise. Thus the questions on staff development became important. The participants were asked how they updated their content knowledge and their practice as teachers and assessors. The permanent staff felt they did the former through reading, research, and searching out articles to recommend to students. Heather was the least confident in this area and felt she struggled to remain ahead of the students; however she also saw her continued work as a practitioner as an important way of remaining current. Maddy (and also David among the sessional staff) saw reading students' assignments as a major learning process. Responses from the sessional staff were fairly similar, although they were more likely to confine themselves to mastering the materials which the students were given. However Margaret worked as a research consultant and felt this kept her up to date.

Most of the participants were not able to offer such ready responses when asked how they developed their teaching and assessing skills. In general the responses were confined to: practice, team meetings, and acting on feedback from students. There was no difference in this finding between permanent and sessional staff, although presumably permanent staff had more practice and more opportunities for team meetings. Only Heather said she had attended a staff development seminar on assessment, and she hoped to attend more.

DE Marking as a Teaching and Learning Tool

The participants were asked how they facilitated students' learning as markers, and whether there were any special characteristics associated with distance education. Most staff pointed out that marking was an integral part of the learning process:

> Assignments are part of the learning process; it's not just something the students do at the end. (Maddy)

Heather, the newest permanent staff member, felt a major role was to

> help students see what they've missed out or where they've gone wrong. Encourage them to read widely.

Several talked about specific strategies which they used marking to improve students' overall learning. For example, Jane mentioned reviewing essay plans or drafts, giving feedback about essay writing skills, asking student support services to set up an advice Web page for students in the subject. The sessional staff were more specific about the role of written feedback in aiding student learning, perhaps because this tended to be their only point of contact with students. Margaret doubted whether 'words on paper' could ever give adequate feedback, although she did her best. She mentioned that a basic tenet of hers was to assume that students had done their best even though she sometimes guessed they had skimped an assignment. Her attitude of respect for students appeared to emanate from her professional background in mental health. The other sessional staff explained that they needed to give as much feedback as possible: comments throughout essays as well as comments on the assignment cover sheet, asking more

questions to 'stretch' the students, and suggesting ways in which students could 'move on'. Margaret mentioned that she tried not to mark too many assignments each day, to avoid staleness, although a very short turnaround time for a particular overseas cohort made this difficult.

Apart from Heather who had not taught internal students and so had no point of comparison, all staff agreed that marking played a particularly important teaching role for DE students. Sending in assignments and receiving feedback was the only contact point with the university for many DE students and so the process needed to include as much teaching input as possible. Maddy said that it was important to explain to DE students why they got a certain mark and how they could improve their mark, although she said, somewhat forlornly,

> I don't know how much attention they pay to that.

The staff showed some awareness of the particular nature of DE students. For example, such students might live in locations with little access to library facilities and therefore it was important to send them as much of what they needed as possible; Alice, for example, sent many students the university's referencing leaflet. Abby noted that DE students often had not studied for some time and needed extra support; and Izzy that the students were likely to have had professional experience in the field in which they were studying, which could be both an advantage and a disadvantage. Most staff mentioned the need for quick response to student enquiries and the need to be flexible with assignment submission dates. The general feeling was that markers needed to give more feedback to external than to internal students, that they needed to compensate in some way for something that was missing. As Alice said

> DE students are not part of the same learning culture as internal students. Feedback is their primary source of learning.

Permanent versus Sessional Markers in DE

The eight participants were given the opportunity at the end of their interviews to reflect specifically upon any advantages and disadvantages which being a sessional vis a vis a permanent member of staff might bring to the task of DE marking. It was interesting to note that generally each group felt themselves to be in a favourable position. The permanent staff listed a number of advantages of being permanent: they were more accessible to students, they knew the students better, they knew the content area better, it was easier for them to attend meetings, students accepted negative feedback better from permanent staff, sessional staff were exploited and often juggled marking with other jobs. However Maddy pointed out that sessional staff could have the advantage of 'being at the coalface' and also they did not have the worry of maintaining parity between internal and external students.

Sessional staff believed that they were advantaged because they only had to focus on marking and did not have the other worries of permanent staff such as preparing DE materials or lectures. David thought that permanent staff might get bored with marking and might not give such extensive feedback as he did. However, sessional staff were aware of some problems; they knew, for example, that the amount of time they were paid for marking did not allow for extensive feedback, although they generally gave the feedback anyway. Alice worried that she didn't have any 'reference points' and could not compare external with internal students. A further issue was the closeness of the marker's relationship with the university. David and Alice were both PhD students and therefore had ready access to university facilities and staff. David felt that this was not a significant factor in his work as a marker, while Alice, on the other hand, felt that if she had not been on campus regularly her marking would have suffered

> If I was working at home, getting resources would have been harder. I wouldn't have felt comfortable ringing students from home - it's more professional doing it at the uni. I needed to be able to speak to Tony (the course co-ordinator).

Another member of staff had taken Alice to the university's Flexible Learning Centre to see how student materials were produced and assignments processed. Alice found this extremely helpful as she was then able to describe the procedures to students. She said, of DE students,

> It's your job to connect them to this place, and if you're not connected it's a whole lot harder.

▲ Discussion

The findings of these two projects have uncovered a number of interesting findings relating to the use of

sessional staff in marking DE students' assignments. A finding from both projects is that sessional markers are not 'one-dimensional'. They are a diverse group of people who range from novice to highly expert, they may be working in a field related (McGuire 1993) or unrelated to the field in which they are marking, they may be studying at the university or they may have no other employment apart from their sessional work. It is not appropriate, therefore, always to apply a 'deficit' model to discussion of sessional staff as markers; nor were the sessional staff interviewed in either study people desperate to get into permanent academic work (Banachowski 1996). They may be 'better' or 'worse' at the job than permanent staff. Other factors apart from employment status are also significant in the way markers approach their work; these include the amount of experience in marking and the discipline and/or professional background of the marker. Heather, for example, as a novice, was more content-focused than the other staff; Alice, the other novice, was less content-focused but this probably arose from her discipline background in adult education.

However, a few differences between permanent and sessional staff were uncovered, and the first part of this discussion will focus upon these. The second part of the discussion will focus upon potential quality problems, while a final section will consider staff development implications.

Differences between Sessional and Permanent DE Markers

An underlying belief among most of sessional markers in both studies seemed to be that they were to some extent 'short-changing' students. This was entirely related to the amount of time they were able to spend marking assignments. Although they generally exceeded the time for which they got paid they still knew that they really ought to spend more time in order to give students the amount of feedback to which, as external students, they were 'entitled'. They recognised that for DE students the marking process was vital. Permanent staff did not have such concerns; they were concerned about the university's turnaround time but not about the amount of time they were able to devote to each student's assignment. However it was not possible to find out whether permanent staff did spend more time on marking assignments than sessional staff; the participants in the UniSA study were asked about average marking times but the information was not ultimately useful as the assignment tasks varied so greatly and could not be compared

The sessional staff appeared to focus more upon teaching and learning issues and less upon assessment. The permanent staff in the UniSA study tended to discuss their concerns in terms of being able to 'defend marking decisions' while the sessional staff appeared more concerned about how students would regard them and their comments. While a focus upon teaching and learning is admirable, it needs to be remembered that marking performs 'judgment' and 'reporting' functions as well as 'feedback' (Orrell 1986, p. 65). The permanent staff members were concerned about the way in which marking fits into university assessment systems and were conscious that students might appeal against their grades. They did not have the luxury, as David did, of devising their own method for grading assignments. For permanent staff the buck stopped on their desk. They were thus performing a 'gatekeeping' function in ensuring that students were not over-graded (Barnes 1997). Although neither study compared grades awarded by sessional and permanent staff the emphasis which the sessional staff placed upon supporting students, and various comments made by the different staff members in interviews and focus groups, led the researcher to surmise that the sessional staff probably awarded higher grades than did the permanent staff. If this was so it would bear out the recent American studies discussed above (Moore & Trahan 1998; McArthur 1999). This is an area needing Australian research.

The sessional staff in both studies were unsure about many areas of university policy on assessment. The CSU markers at their focus group drew up a list of issues abut which they were unclear, which in fact covered most of the decisions which they made as markers. Among the UniSA sessional markers, two had previously worked for the university on a full-time basis, so university policies were familiar to them, although it was not clear how they kept up to date with policy changes. Of the other two, Alice worried about whether she was doing the 'right thing', whereas David did what he thought was best and did not worry about whether it was in line with policy or not. The permanent staff knew what the policies were or how to find them out; this did not mean, however, that they did not sometimes worry about them; for example two of them mentioned plagiarism as being a tricky area to manage, being unwilling to invoke the university's disciplinary policy upon students.

Quality Issues

The two studies uncovered many potential quality problems. Although there was no evidence that the sessional staff in the study were deficient as markers, there was every indication that if they were deficient, it would be hard for the universities to find out. The major problem areas are listed below:

- Markers are rarely if ever recruited via proper employment procedures; they are generally 'invited' to mark, often at the last minute.

- Sometimes markers were recruited who had little knowledge of the content area of a subject.

- Markers were almost never supervised in any meaningful manner.

- Markers had very little upfront induction or training in marking, nor any on-going staff development.

- Markers were often left to invent their own marking criteria, which they might or might not discuss with other members of staff. In some cases, however, there were moderation processes in which they took part.

- Markers were not very concerned with grade distributions, 'correct' marking decisions and the possibility of student appeals.

While some of the above points might apply equally to permanent staff, their application to sessional staff is more worrying as sessional staff have fewer opportunities to learn about university procedures or to ask questions.

There are particular quality problems relating to marking as a part of distance education:

- All markers agreed that marking is especially important for DE students because such students tend not to have much contact with the university (34% of the DE students in the CSU study said they only communicated with the university through assignments).

- All markers agreed that DE students therefore needed more feedback than internal students, but there were no mechanisms in place to ensure that this happened.

- DE students are likely to be returning to study after a break and are particularly prone to being upset by negative comments.

- A substantial proportion of DE students (in the CSU study) did not approve of having their assignments marked by a sessional staff member.

However on a more positive note it should be pointed out that the negative opinions voiced by permanent staff about the use of sessional markers were not necessarily shared by the sessional staff themselves. Without further research it is impossible to say whether the negative opinions were justified.

Staff Development Implications

The lack of value placed upon marking by academic tradition, and the lack of any tradition of training for marking, mean that the development of expertise amongst markers has in the past been essentially a private affair (Orrell 1996). Considering that novices in any field of practice require a great deal of learning management and close supervision (Cornford & Beven 1999, p. 34) it is interesting to note that all interviewees reported that they received virtually no supervision nor training as they learned how to mark.

Hence there is a cogent case for off the job training in marking, for both permanent and sessional staff. This could be carried out through conventional training workshops, or through online learning in cases where markers are distant to the university. In this way different views about the purposes of marking could be presented and novice markers could be assured of the importance of the marking task both to students and to their university. Cross-disciplinary workshops would encourage sharing of different approaches to marking, and ensure that dysfunctional approaches which may be embedded within different disciplines or university departments were not self-perpetuated. They would also encourage the development of networks amongst novice markers so that they were able to overcome their anxiety about performance (exhibited in the UniSA study by Alice and by Heather) and so that as they gained experience they would have an audience for reflection on their practice. Finally the development of such workshops would require universities to develop criteria for good marking practices, which do not seem to be currently

available. While the above argument applies to marking for internal as well as external students, the studies have emphasised that marking is particularly important in distance education. Thus universities need to pay particular attention to upskilling their DE markers.

▲ Conclusion

In a novel called *Tempest Tost* by Robertson Davies, a young man studying for a teacher training qualification in the Canada by distance education in the 1950s reflects upon his experience as a DE student:

> Getting a degree extra-murally has certain decided disadvantages. The first of these is that the student has no one to make him work, and no companionship to lighten his work. The next is that he must take in a great deal of information in circumstances which are, as a general thing, uncongenial to such an exercise. The third is that he suffers from a sense of isolation from the centre of learning which he hopes to regard as his Alma Mater, and fancies that those students who are on the spot are gaining insights which are denied to him; his position is comparable to a man who is in a house where a wedding feast is going on, but who is forced to remain in the cellars and suck his portion of the cheer through a long tube.
>
> (Davies 1986, 'Tempest Tost' in *The Salterton Trilogy*, pp. 78-79)

The responses of the participants, particularly in the UniSA study, suggested that DE is still seen as a second-best to on-campus study. In this context, and to change Robertson Davies' metaphor slightly, DE can be seen as a home-delivered meal without the restaurant trimmings. Markers deliver a large part of the meal, and often deal with customer queries too.

This paper has described the views of the different stakeholders in the process of DE marking and the positive and negative effects of using casual staff to 'home-deliver the meal'. There was a strong feeling amongst most of the participants in the studies both at CSU and at UniSA that good marking and feedback could go a considerable way towards making up to DE students for the feast that they were missing out on. As Alice said

> It's your job (as a marker) to connect them to this place (the university).

Alice felt that not being a permanent staff member put her at a disadvantage when trying to connect students to the university. While this view was not shared by all participants, it seems worthy of careful consideration. While many sessional markers exhibit a professional approach to their role, it may be that universities rely too heavily upon this professionalism, and that a wish for quality assurance in teaching and assessment for DE students requires closer attention to the role of sessional markers. Some suggestions for staff development have been made in this paper, but an overwhelming need remains for further research in this area.

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